

Book Reviews

diverse offerings as Richard Ferber's *Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems* (1985), Elizabeth Pantley's *The No-Cry Sleep Solution* (2002), and the controversial but still highly popular work of Gary Ezzo, *On Becoming Babywise* (1995). But Douglas takes a decidedly different approach to a familiar subject. While Ferber, Pantley, Ezzo, and others offer distinctive and clearly outlined methods for overcoming sleep problems, Douglas offers a smorgasbord of possibilities. Not only does she outline and summarize the perspectives of the recognized experts in the field, but she also gives equal time to her own panel of non-experts—a group of experienced parents who all have dealt with their own children's sleep problems.

It is, in fact, Douglas's choice to share the stage with a series of non-experts that makes her work stand out. By engaging with the voices and experiences of more than 170 individual parents “in the trenches,” she rejects one expert voice in favour of the understanding of a community of equals, thus reclaiming the fraught terrain of parenting in the name of parents themselves, and enabling them, at an individual level, to make the choices that will best suit their particular family situation.

Also distinctive is Douglas's writing style. Eschewing the formal and prescriptive language of many parenting books, Douglas prefers an often humorous, tongue-in-cheek approach that includes frequent references to popular culture and emphasizes not only the challenges of raising children, but also the contortions of parenting.

The end result is a positive approach to parenting which respects both child and parent, places control in the hands of the parent rather than the expert, emphasizes the value of individualized approaches which can more fully meet the needs of children and parents, and, finally, encourages parents to accept and honour the parenting choices they make.

By *The Secret Ladder: A Mother's Initiation*

Frances Greenslade.

Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2007.

Reviewed by Fiona Joy Green

“Becoming a mother brings you close to the bone, to blood, to shit, to mortality and your absolute worst fears. It may be sweet, but it can also be dark and dangerous.” (xxv)

In 2003, Frances Greenslade won the Saskatchewan Book Award for non-fiction for *A Pilgrim in Ireland*. I believe she has another winner in *By The*

Secret Ladder: A Mother's Initiation. The book grabs the reader with its opening sentence—"Odd things strike you when you find yourself lying on the hardwood floor of your own hallway, trying to put together how you ended up there"—and it does not release her until the very end.

Greenslade blends autobiography, the wisdom and insights of a thoughtful and reflective mother, with current research on pregnancy, birth, and mothering, and cross-cultural mythology as she guides the reader through her remarkable and challenging first year of motherhood. This beautifully articulate narrative details the complicated transition into motherhood, the complexity of family relationships, the routine of everyday living, and the changing seasons of the Canadian prairies.

The eleven chapters of *By The Secret Ladder* are divided into three sections—aptly titled Departure, Initiation, and The Return—which follow the magical and mystical internal journey of the new mother. Greenslade gently leads readers through her personal process of uncovering what it means to become a mother. She speaks bravely and honestly of the powerful taboos around motherhood that prevent women from acknowledging the complexity of this extrasensory experience. She admits, for example, "When you become a mother, you undergo a psychic reordering even more monumental and profound than the physical" (xxiii).

While most women undergo an intense reconstruction of the self as they transition from non-mother to new mother, this process is complicated for Greenslade by a jaundiced newborn son in ICU, and her personal near-death experience due to complications associated with the uncommon condition of placenta accreta. Unlike most birthing women, Greenslade's placenta was embedded too deeply in the lining of her uterus, a condition that went unnoticed until the difficult delivery of the placenta. Not only did she experience hemorrhaging, within a month of giving birth—following a third emergency visit to the hospital—she had to undergo an emergency hysterectomy.

Greenslade's narrative gift is her ability to move beyond her harrowing experience, to write a well-crafted, intelligent, and compelling memoir that reflects upon the common transitional experiences of many new mothers. She addresses important issues such as the complexities of breastfeeding, self- and culturally-imposed isolation and insulation, fearful moments of separation and anxiety, and the tremendous pressure to wear the mask of motherhood and to act the "good mother." Greenslade grounds her story in poetry, historical and cross-cultural myths, feminist theory, and psychoanalysis, and details how norms of motherhood are subtly yet dangerously enforced. She also shows how one woman's experience of becoming a mother is uniquely fulfilling and encourages readers to explore their own entry to motherhood.

By The Secret Ladder is a powerful work, lucid, honest, and poetic; I recommend it highly.